

THE WELL-READ LIBRARIAN: REFERENCE SERVICES FOR YOUTH PATRONS

by Kathryn Franklin



The topic of reference services for children and young adults is one that naturally follows along with the last 18 or so years of my life, the time I have spent living with three children. Focusing on young adult materials in college prepared me slightly for the onslaught of the homework needs of my boys. I sold World Book products to earn my free set, bought a *World Book Dictionary* as well as a *Merriam Webster's Collegiate*, hung a huge map of the United States up in the kitchen, and crossed my fingers.

The last five years as the media aide in the local junior high gave me a huge education in the researching quirks of 12 – 15 year olds. Assignments on the Civil War, health concerns, song lyrics, how to build a bird house, pharaohs and Greek mythology are some of the topics they asked me about. Luckily, I had a good line of communication with the teachers and knew in advance what tools the kids could use to complete their assignments. In addition to working with teachers and other professionals, reading the library literature is another way to gain perspective on the needs of younger patrons.

Nearly every article I read mentioned that there has traditionally been little research or writing done in the field of reference for children and young adults and that that absence of published work reflects the neglect this type of reference service has traditionally been given by libraries. Of utmost concern is that the child or young adult patron should be given the same attention normally reserved for adults. The much written about reference interview has to be altered to work effectively with the younger patron and that alteration should be accomplished by training and experience. The reference interview needs to be tailored to the individual, whether he or she is six or 16. Selected literature addressing these needs and concerns follows.

Bunge, C.A. (1994). Responsive reference service. *School Library Journal* 40: 142 – 145.

Professor Charles A. Bunge of the School of Library and Information Studies at the University of Wisconsin at Madison found that although children and YAs

generally need reference services the most, they face many obstacles to getting the information they need. As budgets shrink and priorities change, more “barriers to information” will be erected. He wrote that a basic value of reference service is the “equity in access to information,” that it exists “to help the less adroit,” and that reference librarians trained to deal with children and YAs are a necessity if that equity is to be maintained, since children and YAs are usually among those less skilled at finding information.

Bunge suggested that YA librarians become members of policy revision committees to protect their patrons from any inadvertent policy discrimination and get involved with their adult services counterparts on programs, pathfinder development, even library displays. Staff of all community libraries, public and school, should work across facility lines to exchange ideas, expertise and resources. It is essential to establish and keep open communication and to keep reminding the powers that be that the YA users who are ignored are the adult patrons who don't return.

Winston, M. and Paone K.L. (2001). Reference and information services for young adults: A research study of public libraries in New Jersey. *Reference & User Services Quarterly* 41: 45 – 50.

This article presents the results of a New Jersey survey carried out in 2000 regarding young adult reference and information services. The issues included job titles, population served, responsibilities, reference/information services offered, service policies and philosophies, patron research methods and number of YA staff. Questionnaires were sent to 454 public libraries; 256 completed questionnaires were returned for a rate of 56.3 percent.

The results support previous research regarding YA services which concluded basically that these services are being ignored. The authors state that although YAs make up a large part — 25 percent — of New Jersey's population, there is a lack of formal YA services and staff dedicated to them in public libraries, (which is reflected in the limited literature on YA reference or other services.) He notes that more than half of the

surveyed libraries do not have a specific YA librarian. If a library were to formalize YA services and award the job title "Young Adult Librarian" to a staff person, services would improve due to "recognized responsibility."

Byczek, J.R., and Vaillancourt, R.J. (1998, Aug.) Homework on the range: Public librarians can't afford to be lone rangers." *Voice of Youth Advocates* 21:183 – 186.

Byczek and Vaillancourt (both experienced YA librarians) give advice as to how to deal with teens and their after-school information requests and suggest seven common-sense ways to make any librarian-teen interaction a successful one.

R-E-S-P-E-C-T. Don't make any judgments on the YA question. It's important to them, so it's important to the YA librarian to find the information regardless of the topic. **What's Your Mission?** Be familiar with the written mission statement and reference policy of the library. While homework is the student's responsibility, it is the librarian's responsibility to find the information he needs to do it. **Break Down Barriers.** Leave the comfort zone of the desk and search out the confused students wandering the stacks. **Get to the Real Question.** Ask many questions to narrow the search. This will help both the librarian and YA understand just what it is he's looking for. **Go Back to School.** Open lines of communication with the staff of the local schools and know what assignments are coming up. **Be Prepared.** Develop a homework desk that is savvy to what the teens are going to want and develop pathfinders. **Never Let Them Leave Empty-Handed.** Make sure the student either has what he needs or give him other avenues to pursue.

Burton, M.K. (1998). "Reference Interview: Strategies for Children." *North Carolina Libraries* 56: 110-113.

Burton, a Children's Information Specialist, gives a rundown of the many past studies and writings concerning the adult reference interview and the skills that will improve that interview and thus reference service itself. He states that until recently, not much has been written about the difficulties involved in reference interviews with children.

Burton says that because of the limitations in vocabulary and articulation a child has, special care has to be taken in order to give a child the same level of service as any other patron. In an interview with a child, a librarian should focus on the child and what he or she has to say instead of on the parent, and basic vocabulary should be used. Above all, the librarian must have patience, imagination, and a good sense of humor. The homework quandary was discussed, with experts recommending the child not be asked if the question was for an assignment, thus giving the child equal-patron status.

The child should feel he or she will be given access to the desired information and that he is as important a patron as the next adult who asks a question. If the child has a good experience, he or she will continue to use the library: "Children are not just the patrons of tomorrow: they are the patrons of today."

Bishop, K., and Salveggi, A. (2001). Responding to developmental stages in reference service to children. *Public Libraries* 40: 354 – 358.

Bishop and Salveggi conducted a study of staff and activity in a children's room in a public library in Florida which serves a racially diverse population of approximately 350,000 people. They wrote that the success of a reference interview with a child stems from the librarian's understanding of the "intellectual and emotional growth of children." Child psychology studies show that children can be separated into preoperational (ages two through seven) and concrete-operational (ages seven through twelve) stages. Preoperational children are more "ego-centered" without the ability to use logic. Communication with them is taxing, which makes the librarian's job of finding out what the four-year-old really wants difficult. Concrete-operational children can apply logical thought and have a developed vocabulary, making for an easier interview. Understanding these developmental stages can make serving a child patron easier.

The authors agree with the idea that a librarian should not ask a child if his or her question is homework related, thus validating the child with "equal status," and the child should always be the important cog in a three-party transaction, with the librarian listening to the parent, but responding mainly to the child. The socioeconomic status of each child should also be noticed. Knowing the psychological reasons for certain child behavior makes it all the more important to gain the necessary skills in order to be a successful children's reference librarian.

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